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ABSTRACT

This article covers recent developments in the United States Refugee Resettlement Program and discusses the program's future. A formal refugee pollicy is a recent phenomenon, initiated with the passage of the 1980 Refguee Act. With the passage of the Act, greater attention has been paid to developing procedures for resettlement, and the institutionalization of procedures has led to demands for greater accountability, clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities, and more monitoring of resettlement programs. The problem of balancing the need for structure in refugee services with the need for flexibility is considered in the body of the paper. Some of the issues addressed include: (1) preparing refugees for resettlement and how refugee processing centers function; (2) how administrative goals and policies to create economic self-sufficiency among refugees function; (3) whether the policy of dispersal of refugees throughout the country facilitates or retards acculturation and economic self-sufficiency; and (4) the information gap and research efforts aimed at a better understanding of the refugee experience. Challenges ahead are the need for flexibility in responding to the episodic nature of refugee resettlement programs, the need to balance U.S. international/humanitarian commitments and U.S. domestic concerns, and meeting the requirements of a program which is comprehensive in scope. (CG)

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U.S. Refugee Resettlement: A Program at the Crossroads

The U.S. refugee resettlement program is at a crossroads. During the next few years, its adaptability to changing circumstances is likely to be tested. Many recent initiatives were launched during a period of crisis, when refugee admissions numbered 14,000 per month, and with the experiences of one major refugee group--Southeast Asians--in mind.

Looking ahead, however, one can anticipate likely decreases in admissions levels (though the prospect of a new large-scale emergency is always present); increasing diversity in the ethnic composition of resettled refugees; and changing political and social contexts which effective implementation of refugee policy. How the refugee program deals with its future development is an issue of concern to policy makers and program implementors alike. Effective decision-making requires that the experiences of the past are taken into account, while realistic appraisals of the future are made. To this end, this article outlines recent developments and discusses future challenges.

U.S. Refugee Resettlement Program: A Retrospective

Although the United States has been a place of refuge for all of its history, the adoption of formal refugee policy is a recent phenomenon, with ad hoc administrative and legislative actions being the most common means through which refugees came here. Concerns about the inadequacy of U.S. refugee policy led to legislative action in 1980, with the passage of the Refugee Act. According to the report of the House Judiciary Committee, the "purpose of the bill is to establish a coherent and comprehensive U.S. refugee policy. This objective is

accomplished by creating a systematic and flexible procedure for the admission and resettlement of refugees."

Since passage of the Refugee Act of 1980, considerable attention has been given to developing the various policies and mechanisms needed to make the domestic assistance program more efficient and effective. They include efforts to:

- Improve the preparation given overseas of U.S.-bound refugees;
- Develop and refine programs aimed at stimulating early self-sufficiency;
- Develop policies and programs to regulate the movement of refugees and minimize perceived negative impacts of resettlement; and
- Understand better the experiences of refugees and the effectiveness of programs.

In particular, the procedural aspects of dealing with resettlement have evolved and become more formal, particularly with the institutionalization of certain previously ad hoc programs and offices--e.g., the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement, state coordinators' offices, social service programs, targeted assistance programs, overseas language training and cultural orientation programs, etc.

With greater institutionalization has come a demand for greater accountability, clearer delineation of roles and responsibilities, and more standardization within resettlement programs. For example, recent amendments to the Refugee Act have called for greater monitoring of voluntary agency operations and more reporting requirements for agencies that receive federal funds; consultations have been held between federal officials, state and local government administrators, voluntary agencies,

service providers and refugee organizations to discuss, among other issues, the roles and responsibilities of each sector; ORR has formed workgroups to establish standards for employment and other services; and considerable attention has been given to program management and case management.

While few would argue other then that the resettlement program could benefit from better management, institutionalization is a two-edged sword, which can as easily lead to bureaucratic rigidity as to improved management. As will be discussed in the next sections, balancing the need for structure with the need for flexibility is an issue which all of the agencies involved in resettlement must address.

Preparing Refugees for Resettlement

In 1980, Refugee Processing Centers (RPCs) were established in the Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand to relieve pressures in first asylum camps and provide adequate living conditions for Southeast Asian refugees awaiting resettlement. Although the primary purpose of establishing the RPCs was to ensure first asylum for these refugees, during the past few years they have assumed more significance as a site for pre-resettlement training for refugees. Under current arrangements, U.S.-bound refugees remain in the RPCs for up to six months while they receive intensive English language training and cultural orientation. In addition, refugees with certain medical conditions, such as active tuberculosis, undergo treatment at the camps, where they stay until cured. (Previously, refugees with active but non-communicable tuberculosis were permitted to travel to the United

States and received treatment here.)

Initial assessments are positive regarding the contribution these centers make towards assisting refugees to resettle effectively in U.S. communities. The more successful these programs are at preparing refugees, however, the more some argue for keeping refugees in the centers for longer and longer periods, in order to increase their readiness for living in the United States. For example, a recent report from a California legislative delegation--noting that the ability to communicate in English facilitates self-sufficiency, reduces community tensions and "reduces significantly dependence on welfare, thus further decreasing the cost of income maintenance to federal, state and county governments"--recommended that priority for coming to this country be accorded to those who can demonstrate a fluency in English and that refugees who cannot satisfy this requirement should remain in the RPCs for additional training. This proposal raises logistical problems that could have serious ramifications for refugees who have a tenuous hold on asylum. The RPCs have limited capacity and it takes time to increase their size. If further increases are made in the period of training, they could serve as a bottleneck to admissions, a bottleneck which could alarm the countries of first asylum whose receptivity to refugees is directly tied to the commitment of resettlement nations to admit the Southeast Asian refugees.

Economic Self-Sufficiency

An explicit aim of the U.S. domestic assistance program is to promote early economic self-sufficiency among refugees. In several places in the Refugee Act of 1980, this goal is

expressed. For example:

> In providing assistance ... the Director [of ORR] shall ... make available sufficient resources for employment training and placement in order to achieve economic self-sufficiency among refugees as quickly as possible, ... provide refugees with the opportunity to acquire sufficient English language training to enable them to become effectively resettled as quickly as possible,

In 1982, several amendments were added to the legislation to reinforce the goal of early self-sufficiency:

- employable refugees are required to register for employment immediately, rather than receiving a 60 day waiver as the original legislation permitted;
- employable refugees who are receiving cash assistance are required to participate in an appropriate employment or language training program;
- immediate termination of assistance is mandated for refugees who refuse to participate in appropriate training or accept an appropriate job offer;
- states are required to notify voluntary agencies whenever a refugee applies for public assistance, and voluntary agencies are required to notify welfare officials whenever they are aware that a job has been offered to refugees sponsored by these agencies; and
- refugee assistance to full-time college students is prohibited unless the college training is undertaken under an employability plan developed for the refugee.

Several administrative actions were also taken to facilitate refugee achievement of economic independence. ORR issued program guidance to states, in which employment services and English language training were defined as priority services. In addition, the agency launched a program of targeted assistance, aimed at supporting projects which, in ORR's words, "enhance refugee employment potential and increase the ability of refugees to find and retain jobs." The grants were earmarked for counties which, because they have large numbers of dependent refugees,

needed supplementation of already existing social service programs.

While most of these administrative efforts have been directed towards service provision, less has been accomplished with regard to the delivery of interim cash and medical assistance, with one exception--the encouragement of case management systems. Several states have implemented these systems, in which refugees are assigned to case managers who refer their clients for public assistance and social services and who monitor the progress of the refugees in becoming self-supporting. Yet, although widespread interest has been expressed in case management, progress has been slow in implementing these programs, at least in part because funding and administrative issues have not been resolved at the federal level.

Also under discussion during the past few years, but not yet resolved, are issues pertaining to alternative cash and medical assistance programs. Questions have been raised, repeatedly, about the use of refugee assistance programs modeled after Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and Medicaid, since neither of these programs were designed to meet the special needs of refugees for interim assistance. Although several alternative models have been proposed--including privately-administered programs--few have been tried, to date.

Residency Patterns of Refugees

In recent years various programs have been implemented to influence the residency patterns of refugees. The United States has always attempted to disperse refugees throughout the nation, but since passage of the Refugee Act, the basis for that

policy has been codified. In the Refugee Assistance Amendments of 1982, Congress mandated development of formal placement policy, designed to balance the desire of refugees to be reunified with their family and the concerns of receiving communities about negative impacts that, they fear, will accompany large concentrations of refugees. In addition, ORR has implemented several demonstration projects, including the Favorable Alternative Sites Program and the Khmer Guided Placement Project, and a program for the Planned Secondary Migration of refugees--all aimed at encouraging the placement and/or movement of refugees into areas with smaller numbers of refugees and favorable resettlement prospects.

Generally, these initiatives, in combination with the tendency of the voluntary agencies to place refugees with affiliates that are scattered around the nation, have led to substantial dispersal of Southeast Asian refugees. Efforts to balance the demands of family reunification and the desire to avoid further impacts in areas with high concentrations of refugees have been largely successful. In fact, the degree of dispersal raises a not-as-yet-resolved question, as to whether dispersal facilitates or impedes economic self-sufficiency. The relationship between the two phenomena is an elusive factor in resettlement. Whether adjustment is more rapidly attained within or outside of the ethnic community is a question open to debate. It remains, however, that many immigrant groups have been highly concentrated in a few locations and have also rapidly attained economic success. More research is needed to determine if there

is a cause and effect relationship at work.

Better Understanding of the Refugee Experience

As described earlier, U.S. refugee policy evolved through an ad hoc process, with relatively little information about the needs of special refugee groups; the effectiveness of specific programs; the short and long-term experiences of refugees in becoming self-sufficient; or the short and long-term impacts of refugee resettlement upon receiving communities.

In response to the information gap regarding refugee resettlement, the federal government embarked on a major research and data collection program. Over the past three years, the federal government has funded over $3.5 million in research and evaluation studies and it has supported the development of a large data base, housed in ORR, which has information on all entering refugees. These efforts were designed to yield information for improved policy decision-making regarding a number of key issues: the economic self-sufficiency of refugees; the role of the refugee community in resettlement; the impact of refugees on receiving communities; the health care needs and impacts of refuges; the effectiveness of English language training programs; the resettlement experiences of Hmong; etc.

Most of these research projects have now been completed, or will be by the end of this year. First efforts have been made to determine the policy implications of the research findings, through presentation of the research and discussion of the conclusions at a conference attended by representatives of most sectors of the refugee program. Follow-up work is now being planned to ensure that the information is incorporated into the

policy-making process.

The Challenges Ahead

Almost all of the developments described here have a dual purpose: to better assist refugees who are in need of resettlement and to protect U.S. communities from any adverse impacts of refugee resettlement. The major challenge ahead is determining how best to accomplish these goals. To a large degree, our ability to do so will be determined by our success in dealing with three issues:

- The need for flexibility in responding to the episodic nature of refugee resettlement programs;
- The need to balance our international/humanitarian commitments and our domestic concerns; and
- The requirements of a program that deals with all phases of resettlement, from movement of people out of first asylum camps to their hoped-for integration into U.S. society.

The Episodic Nature of Resettlement Programs

Although in retrospect, the flow of refugees into the United States has been almost continuous during this past century, there has not been one steady stream, emanating from one source. Instead each separate movement of people has had its own causes each course of events has appeared to be independent of any other. As a result, resettlement is influenced by fluctuations in both the numbers of refugees who come to the United States and their demographic and other characteristics.

The episodic quality makes planning difficult and presents challenges. When, as is the case today, the number of refugees being resettled is decreasing, attention focuses on the phase down of resettlement activities. In fact, in the short-term, one

of the major issues facing the U.S. resettlement program is dealing with the reductions that are needed in staff and programs because of the declining number of new arrivals. These short-term issues need to be addressed, though, in the context of what we know is the potential for rapid change in this area. Even greater problems will emerge if it is not kept in mind that new crises are likely to occur and, when they do, the United States may be dealing with large influxes once more.

Moreover, it must be remembered that new flows bring new groups of refugees. Certainly, the characteristics and needs of Southeast Asians differed greatly from those of the Eastern European and Cuban refugees who preceded them. Whether the next major flow of refugees will resemble any of these refugee groups is unknown. In the meantime, however, we do know that under the current resettlement program, refugees are entering from over 20 different nations, and their diverse needs must be addressed.

Given the ebb and flow of refugee resettlement efforts, flexiblity is needed to ensure that this country can respond appropriately. What works best in a small refugee program or one with a homogeneous population will not necessarily work best with a large or heterogeneous group of refugees. The circumstances under which refugees arrive in this country will also affect the appropriateness of specific policies and programs. Some refugee groups have entered in a crisis atmosphere, following rapid evacuation from their homelands, whereas others come after spending long periods in first asylum camps and still others have

sought first asylum in this country.

As noted above, recent initiatives have focussed on institutionalization and standardization of the refugee program. A challenge ahead is ensuring that these efforts improve program performance without impeding flexibility to respond to changing situations.

International/Humanitarian Commitments and Domestic Concerns

The Refugee Act of 1980 recognizes that the setting of refugee admissions numbers should take into account international, humanitarian and domestic concerns. In many instances, there is no conflict between these objectives, but on occasion there is or could be, particularly when there is a conflict between what is needed for the expeditious movement of refugees and what is needed for smooth resettlement. The issues, discussed above, regarding the overseas training program is a good example.

In its starkest terms, the question raised is: to what extent should refugee resettlement numbers and allocations be determined by the number of refugees who realistically must be resettled in order to maintain first asylum, or by the number that the U.S. believes it has the capacity to absorb, with minimal negative impacts, or by some other criteria (e.g., international burden-sharing). Certainly, in 1979, at the height of the Indochinese crisis, the determination was made on the basis of the first question. There are indications that the pendulum is swinging towards the second, with perceived domestic impacts playing an increasingly more important role in setting admission numbers. For example, in recent hearings on the Refugee Act and

consultations on refugee admissions, discussion has focused on the cost of the resettlement program as a factor to be taken into account in determining admission levels.

A challenge ahead is to maintain an appropriate balance between these two considerations, a balance which enables us to continue to play our traditional role as a nation of refuge while addressing domestic needs and concerns.

From Migration to Integration

The third challenge that lies ahead is directly related to the one just described: how to balance aspects of the program related to the movement of people with those related to their longer term adaptation and integration. The resettlement program provides humanitarian relief to refugees by moving them from unstable situations into the United States and assists refugees to become self-sufficient members of our society.

In the years ahead, several basic questions about the phases of the resettlement process must be answered. First of all, more information is needed on just what these phases are and what occurs during them. The research referenced above should help in this regard. Second, policy decisions must be made about which agencies should have responsibility for which parts of the resettlement process. Also needed are better ideas about the transition from one phase to another, in order to avoid unnecessary duplications or gaps from occurring. Finally, the issue of "when does a refugee cease to be a refugee"--at least for the purposes of receiving special assistance--needs to be addressed.

At present, there are no easy answers to these questions. For example, we cannot say definitively that it takes x number of years for a refugee to become economically self-supporting, y number of years to adapt to his or her new society and z number of years to become fully integrated. And, even if we knew these answers for one group, there are no assurances that the information would be true for others.

For the purposes of policy formulation, however, the bullet must be bitten on this issue, particularly since our capacity to admit refugees is, so often, linked to our ability to resettle them effectively and rapidly. First steps were taken in the Refugee Act and its regulations to establish time limits for cash assistance eligibility and federal reimbursements to states for cash assistance costs. These efforts marked a departure from the Cuban resettlement program of the 1960's and 1970's, in which no time limits were imposed on federal reimbursement.

Still of concern are several other issues related to the phasing of the resettlement process, including: time limits on eligibility for social services; the extent of federal responsibility for providing impact aid to jurisdictions with large numbers of refugees who are no longer eligible for assistance but are still in need; the emotional and mental health needs of refugees, which often surface after refugees have been resettled for several years; and the type and duration of support provided by federal and state refugee offices for ethnic associations which will have the long-term responsibility for assisting their members.

* * *

To conclude, refugee resettlement is a constantly changing process, one which requires substantial flexibility to address new issues. It is also a process that suffers when its procedures and policies are so ad hoc that planning is impossible and effective management is difficult to achieve. During the past four years, the United States has made substantial progress in identifying problems, exploring alternatives, and implementing new programs. The years ahead will present their own challenges. Where improvements are needed in the operation of the U.S. refugee program, it is encumbent upon us, as a nation, to find solutions. Where these improvements have taken place, it is our duty to protect them. Commitment to the principle of providing refuge to the persecuted is fundamental to how we define ourselves as a nation. Our resettlement program must match our highest expectations of ourselves.